

Martial arts have *never* been that important to me.

"As long as I can remember, I've always wanted to be an actor," the wiry, well-postured performer admits, with a confidence that seems to mirror his commitment.

"My father was a fanatically dedicated man who created his own fighting style called *jeet kune do*. Martial arts were his philosophy, his passion, his *raison d'être*. But had he lived long enough—dad died at 32—he would have branched out of the action genre. I don't rate myself against him as an actor or a martial artist," reveals the headliner—who, at 6', 163 pounds, is more physically imposing than was his 5'7½", 140-pound father—"but I'd like to think that I'm following in his footsteps."

The trek began 20 years ago with Brandon Lee's first filmmaking experience: playing on-set mascot as his father electrified such bare-knuckled classics as **Fists of Fury** and **Enter the Dragon**. Today, Bruce Lee's number one and only son again stands on a soundstage, located in a former brewery in California's San Fernando Valley, waiting patiently as the crew preps the next shot.

The focus, however, has shifted from father to son. **Showdown in Little Tokyo** marks Lee's US film debut. It also provides a prime indication of whether the 26-year-old actor will follow his father's path to fame or founder in the fog of second-generation film forgettables.

Lee stands on a wooden catwalk, which extends across a Japanese-style bathhouse, complete with *shoji* paper walls, steaming pools, and a complement of half-submerged bathers. Two pert, female Asian extras—with what appear to be bust jobs—drop their robes and climb in. On the pool's deck, men stand clad in white G-strings, their wet bodies gleaming with elaborate tattoos. Denoting membership in the Yakuza crime cabal, the complex designs suggest the fear and fascination surrounding the organization. Snatches of staccato speech float by as the bathers chat in low tones.

Except for the water temperature—at 70°, not hot enough for an authentic Oriental *ofuru*—the vapor-filled bathhouse (courtesy of dry ice) could be in prewar Japan. But when an Arriflex-laden cameraman walks by, it's clear, Toto, that we're not in *Kansai* anymore.

"Dolph Lundgren and I play two cops fighting a Yakuza drug ring in LA," Lee explains. "My character is Johnny Murata, a Japanese-American who's the comedic half of the partnership. I partially define my characters through their martial arts techniques, so I've given Murata a specific fighting style. He doesn't do *all* my moves—only those which match his personality."

Director Mark (**Commando**) Lester calls the actor from across the stage for the next shot. After the huddle breaks up and fight choreographer Pat (**The Karate Kid**) Johnson asks, "Everybody got their cups?", the rehearsal begins.

Lee steps through his moves, first an elbow strike, then a punch. He is *very* fast. Suddenly, he drops to the ground, spins into a sweep, knocks the legs out from under his Yakuza adversary, and sprawls him into the drink. Satisfied with the scene's blocking, the director moves behind the camera to establish a dramatic POV.

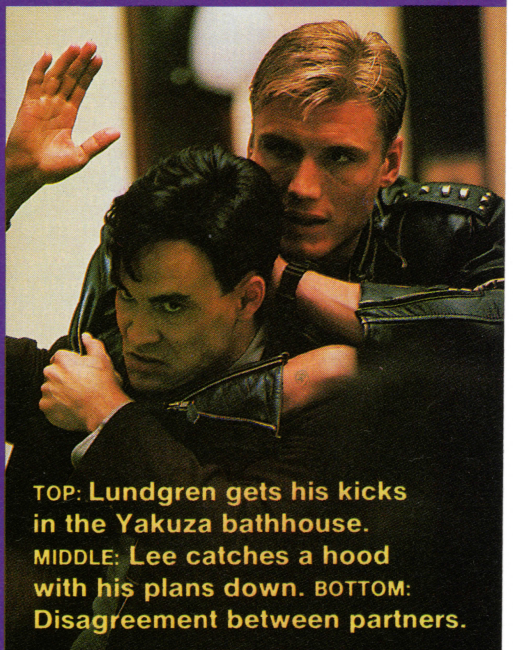
Lee's thirst for Yakuza blood, however, has not been quenched. He laughs a challenging battle cry, picks up a chair, and swings it around his head like a weapon. Taking the cue, an extra seizes a nearby stool, and the horseplay begins. Lee is graciously democratic, willing to bash an opponent no matter what his on-set social standing. Eventually, the duellists call off their conflict and return to work.

Soon enough, progress has resumed, although not without the periodic relief of Lee's melee and repartee. In front of the camera, as well, the green-eyed performer displays a remarkable knack for marrying mirth with mayhem—a talent his father also possessed and one of which Lee's celluloid competitors should take note.

After Lee's scene is completed, Lundgren takes the spotlight. The crew is hyped for action, but the tattoos of the Yakuza villains have smeared. While an assistant retouches them, Lundgren joins Lee on the sidelines.

"Brandon's the hotshot, the fresh new talent, while I've been around for a while," remarks the 32-year-old performer. "Those are also the roles we play in the movie. As far as my character is concerned, he's a large blond guy who thinks he's a samurai—which is funny, because I look at myself, and I realize that I'm a large blond guy who thinks he's a samurai!"

With the director's call, the Stock-



TOP: Lundgren gets his kicks in the Yakuza bathhouse. MIDDLE: Lee catches a hood with his plans down. BOTTOM: Disagreement between partners.

holm-born actor and his two Yakuza opponents assume their places, and the rehearsal begins. Having trapped the leader, Lundgren strides along the pool's catwalk, a .44 magnum aimed at his target's head. The cop tries to handcuff his antagonist, but a sumo-sized bodyguard pins Lundgren's arms from behind. The leader pummels the immobilized hero, who reciprocates by fan-kicking him into the pool. Lundgren's pistol follows, floating like a dead fish. Moments later, a propman picks up the wooden gun and gives Lundgren the real thing as the actors reassume their original positions.

"I think what I have to offer," Lee says, as the unit readies for a take, "is fighting skill combined with acting talent *and* a sense of humor. In action-adventure, it seems like there are athletes who can't act or actors who have no skill in martial arts. Often, the action is compromised by stunt doubles or cutting away with no masters, just closeups. The final fight scene in **Lethal Weapon** between Mel Gibson and Gary Busey is a perfect example. I don't think we ever see them in a two-shot—it's all cuts. I won't do my action scenes that way.

"One of the best pieces of advice my dad ever gave me was that it's easier to imitate than to originate. As I begin my career and look back at his, I've really taken that thought to heart. So I hope no one expects me to copy his work. That'd be impossible! It's not what I want and certainly not what he would've wanted."

Born February 1, 1965 in Oakland, California, Lee (named after **Shane's** Brandon de Wilde) lived with his sister Shannon, mother Linda, and father in Hong Kong, occasionally joining the martial artist as he traveled from Asia to America. After the legend's 1973 death, the threesome abandoned East for West, settling in California where Lee's mother supported the family by teaching kindergarten. Cruising on his Big Wheel, devouring comic books such as **The X-Men** and **Fantastic Four**, becoming an arcade junkie, and playing football, Lee nevertheless suffered culture shock.

"Speech isn't the only language that separates Hong Kong from LA," notes the actor, fluent in English and Cantonese, and passable in Italian and Spanish. "In the East, kids will rough-house and not mean anything by it. But if you push someone in America, that

The gangbusters search for *shabu*, a narcotic smuggled into LA's Little Tokyo. RIGHT: Capturing the spirit of the samurai.





means business. So it took me a few years to learn the score. Until then, my friends, like Chuck Norris' kids, had to tell me if a fight was serious or not."

As the son of cinema's most celebrated combatant, Lee faced his share of serious challenges. "I never encountered anti-Asian prejudice, but I was often the victim of the gunfighter syndrome: someone would *always* want to fight me. Once, on a schoolbus, a guy I had never met said to his friends, 'So this is Bruce Lee's son. Big deal! If I wanted to hit him, I could.' Next thing I know—*wham!* He slaps me in the face. I'm like, 'Who is this guy; what should I do?'

"In fact, I did nothing—until lunch. I approached him in the cafeteria and called him out. He put his hands up, and I beat the living crap out of him in front of everyone. He left me alone after that. But every time I went to a new school, there was always someone *else* ready to fight me."

Schoolyard brawls were occasionally complemented by brushes with the law. In the backyard of his Palos Verdes home, Lee erected a wooden fort as his sanctum sanctorum. Although an avid camper, he often slept in the structure in order to avoid his mother's watchful eye, organize midnight meetings with his mischievous pals, and "enjoy a life of crime."

One night, the youths even stole a car, and hoping to evade a police tail, Lee drove the vehicle into his own driveway. "I thought the thing to do was to get out of the car nonchalantly and pretend like *nothing* was happening. But they caught me anyway, and made me go in and wake up my mother—which was *not* a fun thing to do. 'Uh mom, there are some policemen downstairs, and they'd like to speak with *you*.' As part of the punishment, I was forced to tear the fort down."

Despite the penalty, Lee continued his teenage rebellion, attempting to tear down his image as Bruce Lee's son and establish his own identity. Although he was president of his high-school class, a disciplinary report cited his "bad attitude toward the educational process" and accused him of being "a poisonous influence on other students." He was expelled four months before graduation.

Lee attended yet another school, then dropped out before commencement. Approaching his eighteenth birthday, he realized his hell-raising



days were numbered. "I figured this was the last time I'd be able to get away with anything serious—like committing a felony, such as impersonating an officer."

Sporting a suit and tie, he entered the California DMV and convinced a gullible 16-year-old that he was to be her driving test supervisor. "My plan was secretly to write on her test, 'I have a gun. This is a holdup.' Without knowing it, she'd present it to a guard when she went to get her license validated, and the fun would really begin. Once I started thinking about it, though, I realized it was a bad idea. Instead, I abandoned her at a McDonald's while I made 'an important phone call.' Ever since, I've known that someday she'll see me in one of my movies, and scream, 'That's him!'"

The duped damsel never tracked him down, perhaps because Lee soon passed a high-school equivalency test and left LA for Boston's Emerson College. "I studied theatre, but I couldn't handle all the requirements.

They never meant a thing to me. After all, actors don't need sheepskins." Bored with academia, he ankled after a year.

Although curricular chaos and teen tomfoolery seemed to dominate his life, the youth maintained discipline through martial arts. From ages two through nine, he practiced with his father. Abandoning the technique after the 1973 tragedy, Lee resumed training at 13, this time with his father's protégé, Danny (*Game of Death*) Inosanto, with whom he still practices today.

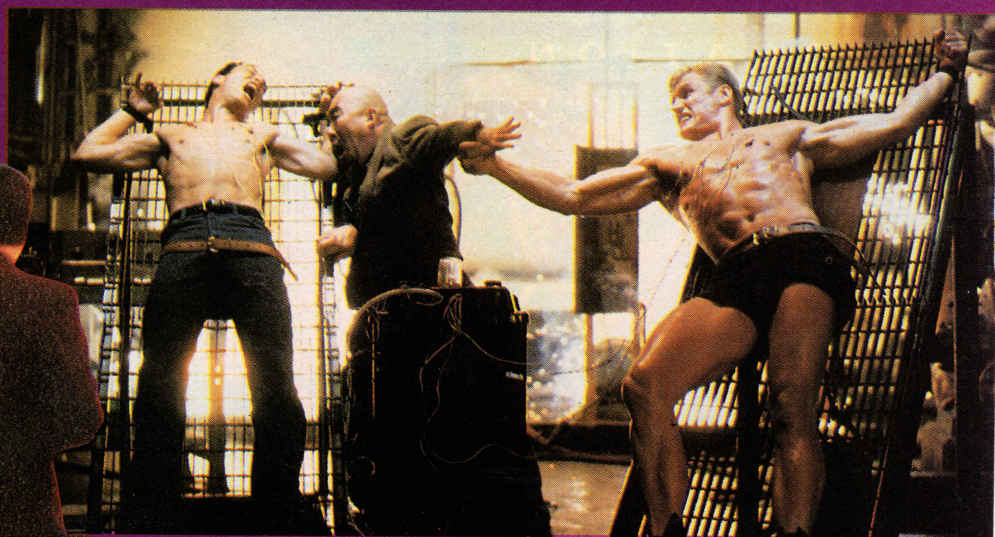
After quitting Emerson, Lee's martial arts skill and acting dedication coalesced into a cinematic career plan. With the advice of family friend Chuck Norris—whose first role had come in Bruce Lee's *Return of the Dragon*—the hopeful made his pilgrimage to Manhattan. Polishing his craft with acting and speech lessons, Lee soon returned to LA.

His dollar debut came with TV's *Kung Fu: The Movie*, based on the 1972-1975 series which Lee's father

had developed as a starring vehicle, then been denied. A pilot for *Kung Fu: The Next Generation* followed, along with two foreign deltoid dramas, *Legacy of Rage* and *Laser Mission*, then *Showdown in Little Tokyo*.

"There have been pictures," Lee admits, "that I really wanted but didn't get—like Taylor Hackford's upcoming *Blood In, Blood Out*. It's too bad because I would have knocked the walls down in that movie. Although I don't know him, Taylor lives in the building next to mine. So for a while after the audition, when I'd drive by, I'd yell 'Brandon Lee's in *Blood In, Blood Out*! That's so cool!' I was hoping he'd get the subliminal message to give me another chance.

"Even without that part, I'm still a member of what I call 'the fucking lucky club.' Actors work hard, but they should never forget how privileged they are in the first place," explains Lee, who drives an Acura and dresses casually. "I know a lot of actors who take themselves so seriously and



Nightclubbing in Little Tokyo.
LEFT: Lee on a collision course
with crime. ABOVE: Escape
from high-tension torture.

believe they deserve fame—they're all fools. But I'd rather not mention names because I never *dis* people who haven't dissed me first."

By any standards, Lee is lucky—a three-pic studio pact will provide him topline roles with creative input. He has already collaborated with several writers to create the deal's first film, Dwight (*Halloween 4*). Little's *Rapid Fire*, which casts him as a Chicago art student who helps a veteran cop crack the city's smack trade.

While the remaining two films are undetermined, the performer has expressed interest in a cineversion of the Marvel Comics hero *Wolverine*. He also aspires to make a picture using martial arts choreography popularized by foreign action stars Jackie Chan and Sammo Hung. In contrast, Lee has little interest in a biopic of his father. "Right now, I'm too busy establishing my own work. Perhaps later in life, I might feel confident enough to try."

"That's all I'll say about my plans. I have a friend who never uses turn

signals when he's driving because he believes all they do is help others cut him off. Yes, I have a strategy, but I keep it close to the vest."

The strategy has allowed Lee to juggle his personal and professional lives. A resident of LA, he has a main squeeze "who's also been great for my acting. Love teaches you about yourself which, in turn, teaches you about performing."

"Right now, I'm basically trying to refine my acting technique—which has presented me with a major philosophical problem," says Lee, a strict agnostic. "For years I tried to find a kind of mental equilibrium, a place where I could accept the twists of fate. In many ways, that destination is the goal of martial arts, too."

"Recently, however, I've discovered that place may in fact be inimical to acting. People pay us to be *affected* by our emotions. So how can a performer be even-keeled and objective? It seems impossible."

"Still, I'm trying to combine emotion

with equilibrium, and I've decided all that matters is what's on screen. Whether I have to starve myself for a role or whether I can pull it off like a nine-to-five job, I'll do what it takes."

Before Lee can continue, director Lester calls the actor back to the set. The next scene involves Lee's capture by the Yakuza.

"I want people to see this and my future films because of *me*, not because of my father," says Lee, as he returns to work. "Of course, it doesn't bug me that audiences will be curious about what Bruce's son is really like. As I've gotten older, I've realized the enormous effect my father had on people's lives."

"Including me! I've never seen any films which have moved me as much as my dad's. Those who loved his work can rest assured that mine will both continue his tradition and go where dad might have gone had he not died so young."

★ Will Dughi and José Alzona